

Lesson Plan

Arab Culture and Society

Outline:

Discussion of Arab Culture

English/Arabic word matching game

List of Resources

(For Arab-Americans using speaking to classes: Begin by introducing yourself. Share a little about your own personal and family history. Origins, immigration to the U.S., relatives back home, experience during historical events like Middle East wars or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This might very well be the most memorable part of the lesson.)

Discussion Questions: (Write the student responses on the blackboard)

What is an Arab?

What does an "Arab" look like? What does an Arab woman look like? What kind of qualities do you associate with Arabs? Are most Arabs rich or poor? Do they live in cities, villages, or tents? What is a Bedouin? Are most Arabs Bedouin? (About 2-3% today are Bedouin)

What are the typical images of Arabs in films, TV, novels, comic books? How many positive Arab characters can we remember from films and TV?

Name some famous Arab Americans. (Give hints: a famous consumer advocate, a top-40s disc jockey, popular movie stars and singers, etc.) Hand out the ADC game on "Famous Arab Americans"; ask the students to link names and identities.

What is the "Arab world?" How is it different from the "Middle East?" How many Arab countries can we name?

Basic things to emphasize about the Arab culture and the Arab world:

The Arab world is culturally rich, complex and diverse: It includes 22 countries; it is the cradle of the three monotheistic world religions, each of which is itself diverse; political loyalties and worldviews of every sort; as well as differences of locality, region, kinship

and social class. (For maps of the area and each of the countries [click here](#).)

“Arab” refers to people who speak Arabic as their first language and share a common culture and history. Most Arabs are Muslims, who follow the Islamic religious tradition. However, there are also millions of Arab Christians and thousands of Arab Jews, who share in the language, culture, and history of the region. Most Muslims worldwide are not Arabs.

The Arab world is cosmopolitan, not an isolated and insulated culture. It has always been the crossroads of the world and, like the United States, has been enriched by the contributions of many cultures -- from Greece, Rome and the ancient Near East; from Christianity, Judaism and Islam; from the Persians and the Turks, India and China; from Europe and America.

At their height the Arab and Muslim empires were central parts of a vast civilization, which united territories stretching from the Atlantic coast of Spain and Morocco across the Levant far into central and south Asia. Within that civilization there was a free flow of commerce, trade, culture and ideas. These empires united a multitude of peoples. Their culture was the product of these diverse peoples, who mutually influenced one another through the ages. Some elements of Arab culture are still shared throughout much of the region once ruled by these empires.

Likewise, the Western world has a pervasive influence today, although not in the same ways or to the same extent in every Arab country. (For example, the impact of the Western oil industry on Saudi society and the Gulf is very different from the French cultural influence in Lebanon and North Africa.)

Arabic Language

Write each student's name in Arabic. Get a list of students' names ahead of time. Write out each name in English and Arabic on an index card before going to the class. Hand out the cards. This is always popular among students.

English words derived from Arabic: Ask the students if they know of any English language words which are derived from the Arabic language. Pass out copies of the exercise below to the class.

Think about the significance of the fact that the English language borrowed so many Arabic words in the field of science and mathematics.

During the Middle Ages, science and mathematics flourished in the far-flung Arab-Islamic civilization, which stretched from Spain into Asia. England and other European countries were relatively backward and "underdeveloped" feudal territories. Gradually through military, commercial and scholarly contacts, Europe absorbed the learning of this more advanced neighboring civilization. Contacts with the Arab world played an important role in stimulating Europe's cultural and intellectual renewal in the

later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. After all, it is "Arabic numerals" which we use in arithmetic, rather than "Roman numerals." (Originally the Arab world adopted these numerals from India and in Arabic they are referred to as "Indian numerals." A different set of numerals is used in the Arab world today.)

Arab Food and Agriculture

Bring something tasty for the students to eat. Humus and pita bread, baklava, etc. This will make the class more memorable.

The presentation of Arab cultural materials in class should not become merely "folkloric" -- colorful, exotic curiosities. Rather they should be presented in terms of their social and historical context. This is what will make them meaningful and their presentation more truly educational.

Much of the history of the Arab world could be told through its food. The story of food is the story of empires, international trade routes, colonialism, social structures, local economies, systems of land tenure, irrigation systems, and climates. Here are a few tidbits from "the political economy of food and agriculture."

Staples:

Flat bread (pita bread) is the staple food from Egypt eastward through the Arab world. This has become familiar and widely used by Americans today.

Couscous is the staple in North Africa west of Egypt. This is semolina, which has been prepared in a time-consuming and painstaking process that involves rolling it through several containers of different sizes.

Olive oil is used for cooking. No animal fat was used until the 19th century, and little meat is used in most dishes. Garlic and onions are also widely used. Many local products are used, as they become seasonably available. This is healthy food and provides a well balanced diet.

The Influence of the Ottoman Empire, Social Class and Locality:

Stuffed grape leaves, cabbage, eggplant and squash are delicious Arab dishes. They are also widely used throughout the region formerly dominated by the Ottoman Empire. From Greece and Bulgaria in Europe through the Arab world.

Some of this was the food of the rich, the "cuisine of the palace" -- elaborate, delicate and using more meat. Sweets like baklava were made with expensive sugar; these are also made throughout the former Ottoman territories in both the Arab world and the Balkans.

But stuffed foods were also local and made with local products -- simpler but quite diverse. In eggplant season housewives devised 30 different eggplant dishes to vary the

menu.

Vegetable dishes, tabuli, humus and beans like chickpeas, lentils and fava beans were local dishes for rich and poor alike, although the rich did not serve them to guests. Lebanese, Palestinian and North African cooking tends to be more diverse and richer than in other Arab countries. It has a greater variety of vegetables because of milder climate, heavier rainfall and mountains. Lebanese people have many fresh garden vegetables and herbs to use. (Most Arab and "Middle Eastern" restaurants in the U.S. serve Lebanese food).

International Trade and Colonialism:

Traditional trade routes reached deep into Asia, Africa and Europe.

- Coffee came from Yemen on the Arabian peninsula.
- Spices came from India and China. (But the Arabs did very different things with them. Arab food does not resemble Asian food).
- Nuts are widely used in Arab cooking. Often these come from Iran and Afghanistan.
- Oranges: The oranges of Jaffa in Palestine (now in Israel) are famous. They were introduced by European colonists in the 19th century.
- Wine: Algeria is a Muslim country and most people do not drink alcohol. But due to the French colonial influence, Algeria is a significant wine-exporting country. Under the French, vineyards replaced olive trees, and Algeria was tied to the French and European market. Today it remains dependent on those markets to sell its wine.
- Egypt: In the 19th century England became the dominant power in Egypt. Rice was grown for the British. But the English wreaked havoc on Egypt by forcing a change from rice production to production of cotton for the textile mills of England. The Egyptian economy became dependent on England.
- Mulberry trees: Local Lebanese entrepreneurs planted mulberry trees in the 19th century in an attempt to foster silk production. Silk worms feed on mulberry leaves. This was an attempt at economic independence and freedom from European dominance. However, the industry declined in the 20th century because of competition from synthetic materials.

Arab Dress

Many Arabs today wear some form of modern Western dress, from blue jeans to three-piece suits to Paris fashions. Others wear various forms of traditional dress.

Climate:

Why do Arabs traditionally wear flowing robes and head coverings?

These clothing styles are very practical and comfortable in an often-harsh climate. In the strong winds of the desert, the robes float and air circulates freely. The head coverings (worn in public by both men and women) are protection from the strong sunlight. The same clothes used to be worn year-round. There were no seasonal changes. A few dresses would last a lifetime.

Colors and Styles:

Throughout the Arab world a loose caftan-like dress with much embroidery is used. But the color and richness depend on local conditions.

- Egypt: Solid colors, blue on white with embroidery.
- Tunisia: Lots of white, some green materials. No black.
- Palestine: Black dresses with much elaborate, colorful embroidery in green and red. Each village has its own designs.
- Syria: Very similar to Palestine, but less colorful.

In countries where deserts comprise much of the land (like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or Egypt) clothing tends to be white, brown or dull colors. In Palestine and Lebanon where there is more rainfall and vegetation, more vivid colors are used. Women's clothing has more decorative motifs taken from their surroundings, such as trees, birds, and flowers.

Wealthy urban women of the 19th and 20th centuries followed Ottoman styles and used gold and silver thread, silk and a good deal of velvet. Village women and poorer people used cotton.

Wedding dresses: Girls started sewing their wedding dresses when they were children. They worked on the dresses for years and the dresses they made became a source of pride. The same rich type of wedding dress was worn among the wealthy from North Africa to Iraq. For poorer people dresses varied with the local products and resources available. After the wedding ceremony, wedding dresses became everyday clothes.

Western dress: In the 20th century many Arab women adopted Western clothing styles - from Paris fashions to blue jeans. This began during colonialism, as Britain, France and other European countries established regional dominance after World War I. (As Ibn Khaldoun, the great medieval sociologist, commented: "The first act of the conquered is to imitate their conqueror.")

Social Status and "Islamist Dress":

The veil: Whether Islam requires women to be veiled or to have their hair covered in

public is a subject of controversy and debate among Muslims. Many argue that the Quran simply mandates "modesty" in dress (for both men and women). Muslim women vary in their practice. Veils were a pre-Islamic cultural tradition. Through the centuries both Christian and Muslim women wore veils in public. In Lebanon Christian women veiled until the 20th century.

Veiling was also a symbol of social class; it signified upper class status. Higher social status was symbolized by head coverings (hijab) and by loose dresses and large sleeves which were not practical for work and indicated freedom from the need for manual labor.

On the other hand, for centuries village women everywhere worked in the fields and their dress had to be practical.

Wealthy urban women lived most of their lives within the households of their fathers or husbands. They lived among other women and most dress was for private quarters. They wore elaborate and expensive dresses. Arab women "dressed for other women" and competed with one another.

Head coverings were for the rare trip out in public and only became an issue in the 20th century when women emerged into the modern workforce. Then a debate developed over "covering" and "what is Islamic?"

Today many women choose to wear head coverings and a distinctive style of dress as a reaffirmation of Muslim identity. During the 1980s in many parts of the Arab world, some women began wearing a plain grey dress and a head covering as a public statement of identity. This was a style previously unheard of. It can be a means of cultural self-assertion, recovering traditional values and expressing Islamist political party membership. Thus "Islamic dress" today is a product not of tradition but of modernity.

This is sometimes related to social class and gender issues. When village girls went to city schools, they were confronted with urban women who were secure and comfortable in wearing European styles. The poorer women could not afford to compete, purchase expensive clothing, or go the hairdresser every week. In reaction, some adopted the newly-developed "Islamic dress" to bypass the problem of competing.

Women also complained that when they wore Western dress, men thought they were being "forward" and made passes at them, while with Islamic dress they found that "men treat me as a person, as a professional, not as a sex object."

Below are two handouts. A matching word game and a key with the answers. Cut and paste them. Distribute the game to the students. Afterwards, distribute the answers.

"SURPRISE! WE'RE ALREADY SPEAKING ARABIC"

English Words Derived from the Arabic Language

The English language borrowed hundreds of words from the Arabic language, just as it

absorbed numerous words from German, French, Latin and Greek. Most of the Arabic words have to do with the fields of mathematics and the sciences, but also include many familiar words in everyday use. Often these words entered English indirectly through the Spanish and French languages, sometimes through Italian. The Arabic language in turn has absorbed words from Greek, Persian, Sanskrit and other languages. How many Arabic words can you identify in their English versions? Some are obvious; others are not.

- 1) Gazelle _____ Al-debaran
- 2) Tariff _____ Al-fac, facah
- 3) Sash _____ Al-jabr
- 4) Zero/cipher _____ Alkimia
- 5) Aldebaran _____ Al kohl
- 6) Alfalfa _____ Almanakh
- 7) Sherbet _____ Al-qaliy
- 8) Algebra _____ Al-qobbah
- 9) Sahara _____ Al-zar
- 10) Alchemy _____ Amir al
- 11) Hazard _____ Dar as-sin'ah
- 12) Coffee _____ El iksir
- 13) Zenith _____ Gazal
- 14) Alcohol _____ Julab
- 15) Alcove _____ Lazward
- 16) Admiral _____ Makhzan
- 17) Candy _____ Matrah
- 18) Syrup _____ Qahwa 19)
- Sugar _____ Qandi 20)

Ream _____ Qermez 21)
Almanac _____ Qutun 22) Sofa
_____ Rizmat 23) Julep
_____ Sahra 24) Mattress
_____ Sakkar 25) Arsenal
_____ Semt-ar-ras 26) Azure
_____ Sharab 27)
Crimson _____ Shash 28)
Satin _____ Sherbet 29)
Magazine _____ Sifr 30)
Saffron _____ Soffah 31)
Alkali _____ Tar'if 32)
Elixir _____ Za'faran 33)
Cotton _____ Zaitun

Key

Here are the English words and their Arabic origins and meanings

(Note that "al" is the Arabic word for "the.")

1. Admiral = amir al (ruler of; originally "amir al-bahr," ruler of the sea)
2. Alchemy = alkimia (from Greek "chemia," a pouring together)
3. Alcohol = al kohl (powder of antimony, used to color the eyebrows)
4. Alcove = al-qobbah (vault, arch, dome)
5. Aldebaran = al-debaran ("the following," from debar, "to follow"; a star in the constellation Taurus)
6. Alembic = alanbiq (a chemical apparatus formerly used in distillation, from Persian "ambiq," a still, and Greek, "ambix," a cup of a still)

7. Alfalfa = al-fac, facah (the best fodder)
8. Algebra = al-jabr (the reunion of broken parts, from "jabara," to reunite, bind together)
9. Alkali = al-qaliy, (ashes of the plant saltwort, from "qalay," to roast in a pan) 10. Almanac = almanakh (calendar)
11. Arsenal = dar as-sina'ah (workshop, literally, house of skill or trade) 12. Azure = lazward (sky blue, from Persian "lazhward")
13. Candy = qandi (made of sugar, from Sanskrit "khanda," sugar in pieces; "khand," to break)
14. Cipher = sifr (a cipher, nothing, from "safara," to be nothing)
15. Coffee = qahwa (coffee)
16. Cotton = qutun (cotton)
17. Crimson = qermez (crimson, from Sanskrit "krmija")
18. Elixir = el iksir (the philosopher's stone)
19. Gazelle = gazal (gazelle)
20. Hazard = perhaps from al-zar (dice)
21. Julep = julab (from Persian "gulab," rose water)
22. Magazine = makhzan (a storehouse)
23. Mattress = matrah (mattress, foundation, place where anything is thrown)
24. Muslin = Mawsil (Mosul, a city in Iraq where muslin was first made)
25. Ream = rizmat (a bale, a packet, especially a ream of paper; from "razama," to pack together)
26. Saffron = za'faran
27. Sahara = sahra (desert)
28. Sash = shash (turban)
29. Satin = Zaitun (medieval name of Chinese city)

30. Sherbet = sherbet (from "sharaba," to drink)
31. Sofa = soffah (cushion on a saddle for a camel)
32. Sugar = sakkar (from Persian "shakar" and Sanskrit "carkara," gravel or candied sugar)
33. Syrup = sharab (from "shariba," to drink)
34. Tariff = tar'if (explanation, information, a list of things, especially of fees to be paid; from "arafa," to inform)
35. Zenith = semt-ar-ras (zenith, "way of the head")
36. Zero = sifr (a cipher)

(Source: Webster's Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary (New York: Dorset & Baber, 1983))

Resources

Arab/Islamic Civilization

Arabic vocabulary lesson. Goes with the Frontline film "Muslims."

http://www.islamproject.org/education/A02_PreviewingVocabulary.htm.

Joan Brodsky Schurr, "The Baghdad that Was: Using Primary Sources to Teach World History." *Social Education* (National Council for the Social Studies) Vol. 73, No. 1 (January/February 2009).

CCAS has teaching materials on Arab history, culture, and politics at

<http://ccas.georgetown.edu/k14/resources/past/>.

Teach Mideast (a project of the Middle East Policy Council). An outstanding website with numerous resources on Arab culture, society, geography, peoples, history, religions, stereotypes, and current events. One innovation is a very creative use of Google Earth to take students on thematically-organized tours of the Middle East.

<http://www.teachmideast.org/>.

Al-Bab (The Gateway). A website with wide-ranging articles, information, and links on Arab society, culture and the arts, language, politics, women, history, etc.

<http://www.al-bab.com/>.

Arab Food

Claudia Roden, *The New Book of Middle Eastern Food* (Knopf, revised 2000). Widely regarded as a classic. Over 800 recipes representing the regions four cooking styles: “the refined haute cuisine of Iran”; Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian; Turkish, and North African/Moroccan, with anecdotal stories of recipes and food groups. The excellent 38-page introduction is a substantial essay in its own right, which includes a discussion of growing up with the foods of a cosmopolitan Egypt of an earlier era, the history of Middle Eastern food and its influence on Europe, and the etiquette of food and hospitality. Partly online at

http://books.google.com/books?id=r723owliVz8C&pg=PA51&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Sanaa Abourezk, *Secrets of Healthy Middle Eastern Cuisine* (Interlink 2000). Mostly vegetarian. By a trained chef, nutritionist, and restaurateur. (Full disclosure: Sanaa is the wife of ADC founder Jim Abourezk). <http://www.sanaacooks.com/>

Arab Dress

Nazanin Hedayat Munroe, “Early Islamic Textiles: Inscribed Garments.” Dress and design as expressions of allegiance and honor.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/byzantium-and-islam/blog/topical-essays/posts/inscribed-garments>.

“Secularism in Comparative Perspective – The Hijab as a Case Study in Three Countries.” Lesson plan. The hijab as a social phenomena and public issue in Tunisia, France, and Michigan.

http://www.islamproject.org/education/D04_Hejab_secularism.htm.

Palestine Heritage Foundation: The Munayyer Collection of Palestinian dresses is described in relation to the history of clothing styles, town and village variations, numerous gorgeous photographs of dresses. <http://www.palestineheritage.org/>. A video is available; here is an excerpt: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbTWiNPCeRo>. See also: Hanan Karaman Munayyer, *Traditional Palestinian Costume: Origins and Evolution* (Oliver Branch Press, 2011).

Palestine Heritage Center, Bethlehem. The Center seeks to preserve the Palestinian cultural heritage and provide employment for women from the villages and refugee camps in the West Bank. <http://www.palestinianheritagecenter.com/>.

Widad Kamel Kawar, *Threads of Identity: Preserving Palestinian Costume and Heritage* (Rima Publications, 2011). The author discusses her personal history with Palestinian dress and embroidery. She interviews women from all over Palestine who still preserve this folk art. They tell their personal stories, as “each textile represents a woman’s life” and is interwoven with the political events which shaped their lives. Reviewed at:

<http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/ht/display/ContentDetails/i/28558/pid/8601>. For an overview, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2JlKyZuG7E>.

Ladah Foundation. For details on Palestinian designs and stitching techniques, see: <http://palestinianembroider.tripod.com/>.

Jeni Allenby, “Re-inventing cultural heritage: Palestinian traditional costume and embroidery since 1948” (Textile Society of American Symposium Proceedings, 2002). Excellent discussion of the changes in Palestinian dress in relation to social and political developments. Available online through searching the title.

Palestine Costume Archive (Canberra, Australia). Provides Palestinian regional and historical information on dress, refugee camp projects, and information on dress in other Arab countries. Has an extensive bibliography. <http://palestinecostumearchive.com/>. “World wide collections of Palestinian costume.” A list with commentary on each collection. <http://web.archive.org/web/20061114140432/www.palestinecostumearchive.org/collections.htm>.

See also the various books by Shelagh Weir, Jehan Rejab, Laila El Khalidi, Margarita Skinner, and Abed Al-Samih Abu Omar.